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# THE PLEASURES OF POVERTY.

## (A WIFE'S PLEADING.)

BY MAX O'RELL.

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*(Conversation overheard in a richly furnished studio: Monsieur is painting, Madame is watching him.)*

*She (reading an envelope).* "Philip Grantham, Esq., A. R. A." Lots of people live in the hope of adding letters to their names. You, my darling, will soon drop one.

*He.* Who knows? Perhaps—thanks to your encouragements, your praises, your love. I must finish this picture to-day, a few hours' work will do it. Now, take a cushion and come and sit beside me. *(She does.)* That's it. Closer than that—good. I can work so much better when you are near me.

*She.* Don't you think that there is a good deal of romance about our lives?

*He (goes on painting).* What do you mean, dear?

*She.* Oh! I mean—that we are so happy!

*He.* Yes, but that's hardly what people call romance. A romantic life means an eventful life, and happy people have no events in their lives. I don't believe that the most inventive dramatist could get a one-act play out of our lives. There is no plot to be found in our lives.

*She.* And we positively decline to plot.

*He.* Of course we do, darling *(a little preoccupied)*, of course we do. *(Stops painting and thinks. She observes it and draws the cushion still closer).*

*She.* Philip *(he starts)*, what are you thinking about?

*He.* You, dear, always you. *(Resumes painting).*

*She.* No, you were not thinking about me just now. *(Coaxingly).* You cannot deceive me. *(Pause).* Do you know that of late I have observed a little change in you—oh! just a little change?

*He.* A change?

*She.* Yes, you seem absent-minded, anxious, even irritable, and, worse than all that—this morning you had forgotten that it was the anniversary of our wedding—yes, you had.

*He.* All in your imagination, my dear child.

*She.* No, it isn't. A woman's intuition is often a safer guide than her eyes.

*He.* Your intuition, then, for once, is wrong.

*She.* Tell me, have you any troubles, any little troubles?

*He* (a little annoyed). No, darling, none. Oh! let me work. Don't ask such silly questions.

*She*. Very well, I won't. (After a pause, she rises, places her hands on her husband's shoulders and looks into his face). Philip, what is it?

*He*. My darling, it's no use trying to work if you—

*She*. If I—well, it is getting dark, stop. (*He stops*). What is it?

*He*. Nothing, I tell you. I feel as usual, although—

*She*. Although? Ah! you see. I was right after all. Well?

*He* (kissing his wife tenderly). Well, sometimes I feel that I should like to do so much more for you than I have been able to.

*She*. What an idea! I am perfectly happy. There is not a woman in the world with whom I should like to change places. How could you make me happier?

*He*. What is your definition of happiness?

*She*. To be loved by a husband of whom you are proud. To be rich enough to afford all the necessary comforts of life; to be poor enough to make pulling together a necessity. And what is yours?

*He*. Well, I confess that I should like to be a little richer than that.

*She*. I see. You are beginning to be tired of this quiet life. Ah, take care, dear; noise frightens happiness away. I believe that many old proverbs want re-editing now-a-days. One should be: "When wealth comes in at the door, love and happiness fly out of the window." Take my word for it, too often Plutus leads to Pluto.

*He*. My dear child, we have to live for the world a little, and—

*She*. Excuse me if I do not understand you. I am only a woman. I can live for you, and for you alone. I know that love is not sufficient even for the most devoted and affectionate of husbands. A woman can live on love and die of it. That's the difference. Now, what is your definition of happiness?

*He*. To be blessed with a dear, adorable wife; to have money enough to enable me to surround her with every luxury—and, my dear, we are a long, a very long, way from being rich.

*She*. Ah, but think what an enviable lot yours is, after all. Yours is the most honorable of callings. You have no poor wretches sweating for you. Your income is the fruit of your personal handiwork. You are your own master. You help make life beautiful. You have a fame increasing every day. You enjoy the respect of everybody, the admiration of the public, the appreciation of the best critics, the company and the friendship of all the brain in London. A King might well envy the life of a great artist!

*He*. But you, my darling! It is you I am thinking of.

*She*. I share all your honors.

*He*. I should like to see you the mistress of such a house as you were brought up in.

*She*. Good Heavens! It is all I can do to keep this dear little one properly.

*He*. I should like to see you drive in a handsome carriage of your own.

*She* (laughing). A handsome cab is much more convenient, goes faster and costs less.

*He*. I should like to see *rivières* of diamonds on your lovely neck, precious stones on your fingers.

*She* (*Serious—almost sad*). I wish no better collar for my neck than your true, manly arms, my Philip. On my fingers? Do you see this little ring?

*He*. A five-pound ring!

*She*. A priceless ring! Do you remember—ah, I do!—how for many weeks you put away ten shillings a week so as to be able to buy it for me on my birthday. A five-pound ring, indeed! (*She kisses the ring passionately*). Not for the Koh-i-noor would I exchange it. To me the real value of a jewel is the love it represents in the giver, and no rich gems could be richer in that sense than this dear little ring. (*He kisses her*). Ah! Philip, the rich don't know the pleasures they miss, the sweetest pleasures of poverty. Their gifts cost them no sacrifice. They don't possess their wealth, it is their wealth that possesses them. They have not the satisfaction of knowing that they are loved for their own sake. I would not give one year of my life for ten years of a millionaire's life. Why, they don't even have the proof that they are honest. They have no temptations. I would shudder at the idea that I might be rich one day.

*He*. Well, I think I could bear it with fortitude. My darling, the philosophers of all ages have taught that money does not make happiness; but sensible men of all times have come to the conclusion that it considerably helps to make it. I want money for no sordid reason. Money is round, it was meant to roll—and I mean to spend it.

*She* (*reproachfully and pathetically*). No, dear, money is flat, it was meant to stop and be piled up a little. You have made over a thousand pounds this year, and we have kept very nearly half of it. We are rich, you see, since we don't want all we have.

*He*. You are a dear, lovely little housewife.

*She*. Am I? Perhaps you will say a good little *bourgeoise*. Possibly! But I will tell you this: happy as I am now, I am not sure that I was not happier still when we were quite poor, pulling, struggling together, hand in hand. I have never dreaded poverty; on the contrary, I have enjoyed it, loved it by your side. To poverty I owe the happiest days of my life. Do you remember, for instance, how we enjoyed the play when, once a month, obscure, unknown to everybody, we went to the upper circle? Wasn't it lovely? And how we often yawn now, once a week in the stalls!

*He*. Yes, and how we made the dinner shorter, so as to be able to afford the price of two seats in that upper circle?

*She*. Right, and that's why we enjoyed the play so much. We were not overfed in those days. You cannot enjoy, even appreciate, anything intellectual after a dinner of six or eight courses; you are only fit for a pantomime or a music hall. And that's why those pathetic forms of entertainment are so successful now. Why, look at the people in the boxes, indifferent, half sulky, lifting their eyebrows and staring their eyes out—like that—awful!

*He*. Yes, all the response, all the appreciation, all the warmth come from the pit and gallery.

*She*. And do you also remember when, two years after we were married, our *general* suddenly gave notice, and left us alone to manage housekeeping as best we could? And how I cooked all the meals, and how you never enjoyed them better. Now, say it's true.

*He.* Perfectly true.

*She.* And the house was gay, happy, ringing with our laughter all day long; so that, in a month, baby put on six pounds of flesh?

*He.* And how I cleaned the knives?

*She.* Which helped your appetite for breakfast.

*He.* And the boots? Now, I did not like cleaning the boots.

*She.* Yes, you did, and they never shone so beautifully.

*He.* Well, I flatter myself I was able to make myself useful.

*She.* Those were and will always be the dear old days of my life.

*He.* And how pretty you looked with a white apron on, and your sleeves tucked up, showing your lovely arms?

*She.* Ah! and how you were once turned out of the kitchen for kissing the cook? You were sorry when I got a new servant.

*He.* Upon my word, I believe I was.

*She.* Ah, you will never picnic like that again, you will never have such lovely times. My dear Philip, the very rich people must lead very dull lives. We look for happiness far ahead of us, when often we have it close at hand. The poet is right: Paradise is cheap enough, it's only the hells we make for ourselves that are expensive. We are as rich now as we should ever wish to be. And, let me tell you that, if ever we get really rich (that will be through your fault), I shall find my consolation in the constant recollection of all the pleasures I enjoyed when I was poor—as the ear remains for ever under the charm of some sweet old melody that once struck it. I could go on for ever on this theme. Now, do you know the holiday of my life that I shall never forget?

*He.* Our trip to Paris with ten pounds in our pockets.

*She.* That's not fair; you guess too quickly. Well, didn't we do it after all? We saw everything, the museums, the theatres, the gardens; and when we arrived home—

*He.* We had to borrow one-and-six from the servant to pay the cab fare.

*She.* Lovely! What fun we had, real, good, wholesome fun! Now, look at our little girl. She will hardly look at the beautiful dolls she has. She always goes back to the old stuffed stocking with a face painted on the ball of cotton that does duty for a head. Now, why? Tell me why she prefers it to all the others.

*He.* Oh! probably because she can ill-use it to her heart's content.

*She.* Not a bit of it; because it reminds her of the happiest, the jolliest days of her life. The pleasures of poverty again, my dear Philip, the sweetest, the never-to-be-forgotten ones, alas, never to be enjoyed again, perhaps!

*He.* I will see that they are not.

*She.* Oh, Philip, you are teasing me. At any rate, tell me that you are happy now, that the ambition of your life will be your work, your work, not money.

*He.* Certainly, darling. But let me tell you also, honestly, that the greatest pleasure in connection with my days of poverty—(pause).

*She.* Well?

*He.* Is that I am poor no longer.

*She.* You incorrigible cynic!

MAX O'RELL.